

## Living in the gap: foreigners in Yogyakarta, Java

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**Living In The Gap:  
Foreigners In Yogyakarta, Java**  
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The discussions concerning 'movement' and 'identity' often focus on potentially threatened identification processes. In contrast to this, there are 'movement' situations in which identification is not necessarily experienced as problematic, but seems to become overall less relevant. In the case of foreign nationals living in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, movement is sometimes seen as a possibility for extending one's personality, rather than questioning it.

This is made possible through the specific circumstances under which this kind of movement occurs. In the context of global political, economic and social inequalities, living in the 'gap' between their 'home' countries and the Indonesian setting, this existence gives rise to various economic and social gains. This situation seems to diminish the sense of urgency of identification processes, while at the same time producing a set of diverse affiliations, which also bring about changed notions of 'home'.

## **Introduction**

Regarding the papers presented in this issue, and the tenets of the 'movement' literature in general, one feature emerges: the movements described often give rise to an exacerbated sense of 'identity', or identification, that is experienced as problematic by the individuals concerned. Whether it is developing new strategies as in the case of the [German Turkish entrepreneurs in Berlin](#), or attempts to attain a 'new' identity as with the [British in Andalusia](#), identification seems an issue that people struggle to come to terms with.

In contrast to this, I would argue that movement can also impact on identification in a different way. It can make identification not a more, but a less salient issue. In the case of foreigners [\(1\)](#) living in Java, I would maintain that their form of existence produces diverse, but loose, ways of identification. Along with these, go similarly altered notions of what constitutes 'home'. I then argue that these affiliations have little of the urgency and anguish that often accompany processes of movement.

Instead of 'identity', the notion of 'home' is more relevant for characterizing this 'gap life'. But like 'identity', 'home' is often not seen as a problematic issue. The reason why it is a crucial concept for explaining gap life is that the altered, multiplied and diversified concepts of 'home' not only distinguish gap life, but make it possible in the first place. People can also afford to live in the gap because they operate from a secure ontological basis, which is partly sustained by these new notions of 'home'. Thus, the changed sense of 'home' makes the existence of 'living in the gap' possible.

As specified below, the altered sense of 'home' characteristic of 'living in the gap' only holds for a very circumscribed group of individuals and situations. Also, I do not mean to present this development as

a redemptory one. It is enabled in the first place by economic and social inequalities. Thus, it also creates its own victims: people who cannot, or do not choose to, 'live in the gap', but rather are submerged by it. In the following, I describe the 'gap existence', the gains resulting from it as well as the impact it has on notions of home and identity. On a concluding note, I point out some of its problematic aspects.

### **The gap existence**

To explain how I encountered what I have called 'gap life', I need to put the following in context. This paper is based on ongoing fieldwork I have been conducting since September 1999 in Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia. The foreigners that I have looked at in Yogyakarta are mainly European and US-American nationals. Yogyakarta doesn't have a large 'foreign' population in numerical terms, as compared to Jakarta, but still a noticeable one. What marks foreigners living in Yogya is that they have not been posted there by companies from their 'home' countries; they have come to live there by their own initiative. While I refer to the former as 'corporate expatriates', foreigners in Yogya could be called 'lifestyle expatriates'.

Most Yogya foreigners engage in self-styled small-to-medium scale business enterprises, are employed in the teaching or cultural sector, work for non-governmental organisations, pursue their own projects in the arts or social work, study at one of the universities or simply come to live there without any income-generating activities. As private entrepreneurs, they concentrate on the production and export of furniture and handicrafts, or run tourism-related venues such as guesthouses, bars or restaurants. In the 'cultural' sector, English teaching is most prominent, next to French and German, and the local branches of cultural institutes also employ several foreign nationals. As Yogya is not an industrial center, there are few NGO -projects directly concerned with Yogya, but some maintain offices there and have volunteers working for them. Most characteristic for Yogya are the foreigners who are not directly engaged in 'business' activities, but in what I have called 'personal projects'. These are often related to art or social work or simply consist of a lifestyle that allows them to pursue various personal interests.

Compared to Jakarta expatriates, Yogya foreigners live in comparatively modest accommodation, which while more expensive than that of the average Yogya citizen is still cheaper than accommodation in their home country. What marks these foreigners specifically as part of a 'transnational' phenomenon are their movement patterns. In contrast to older foreigners, who often stayed in Indonesia for years at a stretch, these 'lifestyle expats' frequently move back and forth not only between Indonesia and their home countries, but also between other countries as well. In that sense, the situation in Yogya is characterized by a certain amount of 'coming and going' - people make frequent trips to Jakarta, Singapore or return to their 'home' countries for work, social or visa reasons. But this transience also bears its own sense of stability: usually people don't leave for good, but maintain ties to Yogya while they are away, and return frequently to stay there. Another feature which is crucial for the notions of

'home' is that they maintain close ties to their home countries, their friends and family there. Moving to Yogya in that sense is not seen as a decisive, final move, but rather a temporary choice which can be reconsidered and revoked if the need arises.

In the process of encountering these foreigners, I was wondering mainly about two things: what made them come to Yogya, and what made them stay? What made people come there was quite often determined by accident. Most of them had come to Indonesia for the first time as tourists, or while visiting friends. Often they hadn't even been especially interested in Indonesia as a country, but more or less chanced upon it as a travel destination. However, while visiting, and getting engaged with the place, they realized what lifestyle possibilities could open up for them there.

Considering all this, it seemed to me that their lives could best be captured in the metaphor of 'living in the gap'. They were living 'in' the gap geographically and socially: moving back and forth between countries, but being neither completely part of one or the other society, or maybe a bit of both. Alternatively, one could describe the gap as a 'third space', one that is neither wholly home-country or Indonesian, but instead is constructed through the foreigners' particular situation in Indonesia. This 'gap' or third space is inhabited and continuously re-created by the foreigners. Living in the gap is made possible through differences between them and Indonesians. The 'gap' is a space opened up by these differences, and providing a habitat because of the gains arising from them.

One of the things that makes foreigners stay in Yogya is the realisation that they can build an existence, not otherwise available to them, because of the economic and social differences between their home countries and Indonesia. Their greater economic power allows them to lead comparatively comfortable lives in Yogya, while the social and cultural differences provide a variety of professional possibilities and social and personal advantages which wouldn't present themselves in their home countries.

### **...and its gains**

these 'gains' or advantages share a basis in economic and social gradients between the foreigners 'home' country and Indonesia. Usually it is the interaction and combination of several of them which provide advantages for foreigners. The existence of foreigners in Yogya is characterised by these differences between them and the Indonesians they encounter. My argument is that, although these differences become relevant in multiple and ambiguous ways, they can provide advantages for the foreigners. One could also discuss the ways they disadvantage or limit them, but for the present case I focus on the favourable aspects.

The easiest to recognize are probably the economic ones: the greater economic power of foreigners compared to most Yogya citizens provides them with a lifestyle often unavailable to them at home. Other advantages arise from what is perceived as 'difference' or 'otherness', or what is called the

'bonus of the exotic'. These 'social differences' are a complex set of features that get played out in various ways. An important aspect that constitutes these social differences is the idea that 'white' Westerners, almost irrespective of nationality, are in certain ways considered superior to Javanese or Indonesians.

The idea of superiority seems to be based on several aspects: greater political and economic power; belonging to highly industrialized countries with 'high technology', a high standard of education, high standard of living, countries marked by effectivity, 'hard work' and success. This often seems the basis for the admiration of foreigners, it endows them with a certain prestige, and a great deal of attention, which invariably influences their everyday lives.

At the same time, it is important to point out that foreigners are also considered inferior in many ways. For example, they lack Javanese social and cultural competence, spiritual awareness and morality; they lack restraint and politeness. They are sometimes regarded as 'children', who behave inappropriately but can't be expected to know any better. Obviously there are a multitude of attitudes towards foreigners among Javanese, in the 'superiority' as well as in the 'inferiority', and various other discourses. Here I am focusing on the perceived superiority of foreigners, because its impact on foreigners' lives is relevant in this context.

Subsequently, one could ask how foreigners themselves relate to this situation. Again, there is a whole range of attitudes towards these issues. It seems that in many cases, the idea of superiority of foreigners as such is— at least outwardly— rejected. What might sometimes be retained, or maybe reinforced, is the idea of foreigners bearing valued qualities, such as inventiveness, organisational skills, long-term planning and the like. Often it is claimed that, while these differences supposedly exist, they don't imply any further judgment. It was put by several people in a statement as:

We are different, but not any better.

which characterizes in a nutshell the mental attitude they ascribe to themselves. To what extent this reflects 'political correctness', rather than an actual persuasion, is of course not always evident.

Social differences are not confined to increased social status, but can comprise a 'better' education and professional training, as well as personal skills and 'intercultural knowledge'. For example, the ability to interact with both Indonesians and other foreigners in a way that is advantageous for them. These differences provide the foreigners with a range of benefits or 'gains'.

There are 'professional gains', such as foreigners being offered more professional possibilities than in a Western country, often combined with a higher income or increased living standard. It means that foreigners can obtain jobs they couldn't at 'home'. This holds especially for setting up business projects like furniture or handicraft production and export. Usually, the capital required to set up a

business in Indonesia is much smaller than in Europe or the US, as is the business knowledge. Many of the small scale entrepreneurs have not run businesses at 'home', and didn't necessarily have specific qualifications for it; still, they often succeed. This is partly due to the fact that: 'in Indonesia, you can afford to make mistakes without losing your business immediately', because, since operations are on a smaller financial scale, mistakes are less costly.

A lot of foreigners' success is due to structural advantages. As someone put it, 'to be successful in Europe, you need to be very smart. Here, you only need to be half-smart'. This is partly credited to the low competition from Indonesians in their specific sector, but also to their better starting position in terms of general education, as well as higher motivation and organizational and planning skills. These advantages also extend to foreigners holding a job in their original profession. As a business administration graduate put it,

in Europe, there is lots of competition and all my friends have to work hard to be successful. Here in Indonesia, I have advantages from the start because of my better education and it is much easier for me to maintain a good position.

Apart from the professional, there are social and personal gains. As I have mentioned above, foreigners can experience a gain in social status that functions as an 'ego-boost'. This has several consequences; one is an apparent increase in one's romantic and sexual attractiveness. As a foreigner, female or male, it is usually quite easy to establish a relationship with an Indonesian, if one wishes to do so. That this is also often to do with economic factors is obvious. Although these relationships get used in different ways by foreign men and women, there also seem to be a few similarities. One could argue that a relationship with an Indonesian often provides them with a degree of agency not available to them in relationships 'at home'. For example, it seems that both foreign men and women often make efforts to 'educate' their partner— often in the form of providing them with language or university courses. This is not only 'raising them to their level', but sometimes also moulding them according to their ideas. Foreign women, in particular, frequently make efforts to increase the life possibilities for their partner— a situation that doesn't occur that often in Western countries.

Thus, I would argue that these relationships can provide agency for the foreign partners, and allow them to become 'charge-taking benefactors'. One could speculate how this arises from current gender relations in Western societies: while men might feel the importance of their position as a provider has been declining, women might find there are too few possibilities to 'take charge' of their partners' lives.

Apart from these gains in relationships, there are also more 'personal' or individual gains. For example, especially with younger people, living in Indonesia is perceived as a chance for personal growth. As an English woman explained

since my money goes so much further here, I can pursue my personal interests- like doing creative things, learning the language, etc– without having to do a shit job like I would have to in London. The pressure isn't there, which gives me the time and space to think about things.

In sum, it becomes clear that these gains originate from real or perceived differences and inequalities, between foreigners and Indonesians. Foreigners realize that their 'capital'– financial, social or cultural– yields much more profit in Indonesia. Thus, it seems that it is not only your money that goes further, but also your knowledge, efforts, and even personality.

### **In what way does culture matter?**

As mentioned above, I initially assumed that foreigners might be drawn to Java because of its cultural heritage, as in traditional music, dance or batik, or even by practices of Javanese mysticism. It can be argued, though, that Javanese 'culture' neither played a major role in attracting foreigners in the first place nor in their decision to stay there. As an American woman living in Yogya put it,

Most of my friends here are not madly in love with Indonesian culture ...but you realize that your money goes so much further here, and it gives you the space to do things that you cannot do at home.

Although culture was not the reason to come there, quite a few foreigners develop an acquaintance with 'Javanese culture' or society as they go along. A lot of the Yogya foreigners are quite fluent in Indonesian. They are often directly involved with Indonesians– at least in their work or projects– on a daily basis. Thus, they often acquire some 'intercultural competence', including knowledge about 'correct' and effective interaction with Indonesians. This doesn't necessarily imply a greater appreciation or understanding as such, but it is recognized as supporting their interests. Many foreigners aim at maintaining good social relations with their Indonesian friends, colleagues and neighbours, and quite a few consider themselves to be fairly successful in this.

One could ask in what way this particular situation– intercultural knowledge with a detached attitude– arises from or impacts on the foreigners' senses of identification. Foreigners don't necessarily immerse themselves in 'Javanese' society, but neither do they avert themselves from it out of a heightened sense of their 'own' (national) identity. Their identities seem to be neither challenged, nor reinforced, by their residence abroad. In the following, I will try to characterize this specific way of identification which might be characteristic of people living in the gap.

### **Is identity an issue?**

I suggest that the motives behind why people choose to live in the 'gap' influences how they relate to Indonesia, to their 'home' country and how it in turn produces a diverse set of affiliations. The gap situation is characterized by a decreased relevance of 'national identification'. Being of a certain nationality is not denied or experienced as problematic. On the other hand, living in the gap doesn't seem to intensify a sense of national identity either. Instead, I would argue, a sense of national

identity is retained, but at a comparatively low level. It is not an issue that matters in everyday life; it becomes almost a casual fact.

The taken for granted character of nationality is important because it goes against the assumption that living in a different country necessarily threatens one's sense of identity. This doesn't seem to be the case here. Rather, it seems that living in the gap is made possible precisely through an underlying secure sense of identity. One could even argue that living in Indonesia as a 'white foreigner' is unlikely to undermine one's identity, but rather to reaffirm and reassure it. This might be not so much because of one's status as a specific national or 'white person' (orang bule), but rather because of one's position as a privileged, wealthy individual.

But there are other aspects of why identity is not an issue. It is maybe brought about by the reasons that prompted people to choose a 'gap life' in the first place. Their decision to move is partly functional, in the sense that the reason to move is often the realization of the gains of a gap life. Thus, it is not an aversion to one's passport country that made people leave, but rather a vague dissatisfaction with the possibilities available. But the motivation isn't a specific attachment to Indonesia either; there is a certain degree of arbitrariness in their move; it isn't necessarily country- or 'culture' specific. This lack of strong 'identification', with either country, could be characterized as detachment. But this doesn't imply an attitude of indifference; it just generates a set of diverse and loose affiliations, as will be discussed below.

Taking this into account, and referring back to the detached-retained sense of 'national identity', it appears that the concept of 'identification' is not the most appropriate one with respect to this type of movement. Instead, the concept of 'home' might be better suited to elucidate the nature of these diverse affiliations.

### **Home is many spaces**

That the notion of 'home' maybe more seminal in exploring the gap is also suggested by the fact that it gets discussed much more than 'identity'. 'Gap people' seem to be more conscious of changing notions of home; there is often a realization that 'home' has multiple meanings for them. My argument is that the notion of home has undergone a fundamental diversification, as in the nature of what is considered 'home', hence its description as 'spaces'. This ongoing relevance of home, albeit in different forms, ties in with Rapport and Dawson's claim that 'the evidence points to a successful resilience of "home"', even if people 'refrain from finally and essentially affixing their identities to place' ([1998:32](#)).

In the case of living in the gap, this could be identified as a 'double deterritorialization'. Home gets deterritorialized in the sense of a shift from home being one place to being many places. While 'home' used to refer to one specific geographic location, it can now denote several locations simultaneously.



But secondly, home has also turned from referring to physical places to referring to social 'spaces', or even virtual ones.

As far as the theoretical connections are concerned, one can argue that the emerging notions of home and the 'gap life' presuppose and reinforce each other at the same time. One can only 'live in the gap' comfortably if one is at ease with these diversified notions of home. But simultaneously, the practices of gap living also enact and further develop these notions.

As an example, I quote a woman living in Yogyakarta, as she recounts her return to Yogyakarta after a 'holiday' in Germany:

So when I went back, I first went to my parents' place, because I had stored my things there. But none of my friends are left there any more. Then I went to Berlin, because my boyfriend lives there. And then I went to Hannover, where I worked and lived before coming to Indonesia, and where I still have a flat. But when I came back to Yogyakarta and turned into our driveway, I also felt like coming home.

Although not all of the places one has been involved with over several years retain the same relevance, it becomes difficult to single out one place that is 'home'. Instead, this is substituted by several places with different degrees and forms of attachment. Another woman, trying to define her 'home', listed various places, and concluded: 'well home is where my friends are'. Obviously, friends of 'gap people' are often scattered over several cities and countries as well. There can be clusters of friends in one city, while others are consistently spread out and moving themselves. It is, therefore, more appropriate to speak of social networks that are not defined locally. As a American based in Jakarta, but travelling a lot for his work put it:

I can imagine living like this for a while... I don't mind the travelling as long as I have some sort of basis to go back to, like my flat in Jakarta at the moment. Next month I'll have to go to Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok for work, but a lot of my friends live there, which is great. Really, I couldn't survive such a lifestyle without this kind of network.

This network can also include one's family, which often remains a stable point of reference. Although sometimes, parents don't live in the person's passport country any more; in that case, 'going home' is even more difficult to define. Alternatively, people who have been moving a lot as a family declared that 'my family is my home— no matter where they happen to live at the moment'.

Subsequently, for many people maintaining these networks means communicating with them via the Internet, or less frequently, by phone. In any case, the importance of the Internet, and specifically email, can hardly be underestimated. It is not an additional feature to these lifestyles, but makes them possible in the first place. Since personal visits are still important, but are more difficult and less frequent, email is often the only way social relations and friendships are maintained over long time periods and geographical distances. As one individual put it,

I always tell people my most permanent address in the last couple of years has been my email address, and that is kind of true. At the moment I am in Indonesia, but I might not stay here forever. But a lot of my friends are scattered like that, and we all keep in touch via email. I am at home where my email is, and hotmail doesn't have a place...

Looking at an email address as a notion of home, which has no specific physical place, but is theoretically accessible just about anywhere, one could say that email was the ultimate version of 'home' - completely deterritorialized, yet globally accessible and invariant to a person's movements. So among the multitude of emerging notions of 'home', the notion of the internet as a 'virtual home' is probably one of the most significant developments.

Looking at the connection between email and the 'gap life', one could argue that these are merely correlated phenomena that occur simultaneously. It is possible to show, though, that there are substantial, causal links between the two. One point is that the 'gap life' doesn't only lead to an intensified use of email, but in turn email makes 'gap life' easier in the first place. Email alleviates potential social losses and sufferings that occur during a prolonged stay abroad. While living in Indonesia, for example, is sometimes described as social hardship by an older generation, some of this gets relieved through the use of email. This doesn't only hold for contact with friends and family, but also keeping in touch with 'what is happening' in one's home country.

In that sense, the internet fundamentally changes the experience of 'living abroad' and makes it less dramatic than for an older generation. For example, the older generation often speaks of 'home' as a loss; something that could not be retrieved and had to be given up during their stay in Indonesia. For those living in the 'gap', this doesn't apply. They sustain their economic and social ties with their home countries over longer periods; frequent visits back as well as visits from friends and relatives help to ensure this. Through the internet, they also keep in closer contact than would have been possible some years ago. Although there might be a slight sense of alienation when going to their home country, 'home' has, for the gap generation, lost its sense of loss and suffering, to be replaced by a choice between multiple lifestyles.

### **Gap life isn't for everyone**

The literature on movement and globalisation often carries a sense of celebration and an attitude of 'everything is possible'. It is therefore important to point out some of its limitations which are often overlooked or played down. For example, the 'unlimited movement' follows in fact quite specific patterns. The 'gap' doesn't open up anywhere in the world; it depends upon economic and political power gradients, which (Western) people can use for creating a gap existence. It is limited to certain regions and within these, focused on specific places. In that sense, the possibilities for the 'gap lifestyle' are not global, but quite circumscribed.

Secondly, the 'gap lifestyle' isn't open to anyone. Since it depends on the economic and social inequalities mentioned, it can only be experienced by a certain group of people like those from

industrialized Western countries. Due to its exclusive nature, the 'gap lifestyle' is not a liberating development, but reproduces the inequalities it is based on. Most importantly, the gap situation reinforces the need to pay attention to the way social and material conditions constitute identity and gap life. Gap life can probably only be enjoyed by individuals with an assured sense of personal identification. As suggested earlier, it is often their material basis which endows foreigners with such a secure sense of identity. It is a useful reminder of the theoretical necessity of not separating the social and cultural aspects of movement from its economic ones. This seems important since in the discussions on migration and its effects on identification, the discursive and symbolic aspects of identity have often been foregrounded, while economic factors have received less attention.

Finally, 'gap life' also points to the continuing relevance of social preconditions for identification. While the individuals and situations I describe do not provoke anxiety, there are also materially well endowed individuals who technically live 'in the gap', but lack this secure sense of identity without which gap life can't be appreciated. For them, the gap is not a desired 'home' but an uncomfortable limbo. This can be the case for example with 'ethnic Indonesians' who have lived abroad for a longer period of time and then, through the 'globalisation of markets', return to their passport country Indonesia to work or live there as 'expatriates'.

This situation is sometimes experienced as quite difficult by them. While they might feel a much stronger sense of affiliation with the expatriate community of the country where they lived in previously, this feeling is not always reciprocated by the respective expatriates themselves. In some cases, though, this rejection isn't necessarily expressed by expatriates, but exists merely as an underlying fear of the 'Indonesian' individuals themselves, which only exacerbates the situation. At the same time, while they might feel drawn to, but rejected by, the expatriate community, these 'ethnic Indonesians' are often not considered 'real Indonesians' any more by their Indonesian relatives or acquaintances. They are sometimes regarded as too 'westernized' and not belonging to the 'real Indonesian' community any more either. So these individuals might seek close affiliations, but are frequently denied them. In that sense, the gap lifestyle is reserved for people who are in a position to choose— places of residence as well as social and cultural affiliations.

## Note

1. I use the term 'foreigners' here rather than 'expatriates' because it seems less restrictive. Although 'foreigner' can denote any non-Indonesian national, I have focused on 'foreigners' from Western industrialized contexts, such as the US and Europe.

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## Reference

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